

Episode 26: Angela Hanks and Janelle Jones | Transcript

[Music]

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Hi, and welcome to Hidden Truths, the podcast where we examine the root causes of economic and racial inequality. I'm Jhumpa Bhattacharya, and I'm thrilled to be joined by my cohost, Anne Price. Hi, Anne.

ANNE PRICE: Hey, how are you?

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: And our guests, Angela Hanks and Janelle Jones. Angela and Janelle are two of the visionary leaders at the Groundwork Collaborative. A think tank and advocacy organization dedicated to advancing a cost-cutting economic narrative for the progressive movement.

Angela is the deputy executive director at Groundwork Collaborative. She previously held roles at the Center for Law and Social Policy, or CLASP, the Center for American Progress, CAP, and served as counsel on Congressman Elijah E. Cummings' legislative staff. Her work has been featured in the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *The Atlantic*, among others, and she's a regular contributor to Forbes.com.

Janelle is the managing director for policy and research at Groundwork Collaborative. Previously, she was a research at Economic Policy Institute, or EPI, Center for Economic Policy Research, and the Bureau of Economic Analysis. Her work has focused on labor markets, racial inequality, unemployment, unions, and job quality. Her research has been cited in the *New Yorker*, *The Economist*, *Harper's*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Review of Black Political Economy*, as well as other publications.

Together, Angela and Janelle are a powerhouse bringing a wealth of policy knowledge and experience with a particular focus on narrative change and advocacy around race, wealth, and the economy. You can see how we're really, really, excited to have these two fabulous women on our podcast today. Because there's so much intersection, I think, between the work that we here at the Insight Center do and what Angela and Janelle are leading over on the East Coast. So thank you both so much for joining us today.



ANGELA HANKS: Thanks for having us. We're really excited to be here.

JANELLE JONES: Yeah, this is great. Thank you guys.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: So I kind of wanted to start our discussion by talking about the Groundwork Collaborative's vision, which is really centered around this foundational concept which I love, which is, "We are the economy."

Can you tell us what this means and why you thought this particular message, "We are the economy," was important?

ANGELA HANKS: Yeah, so Groundwork's mission, as you mentioned, is to advance a coherent, persuasive, progressive, economic worldview and narrative. And the reason why we exist, the reason why we came together, is sort of this idea that one, frankly, doesn't exist right now.

On the progressive side, we have a lot of values and things we care about, but we haven't done a great job articulating how those things fit together and our vision for the economy. So as we've been working on this project – and sort of the consequence of doing that means that even in progressive spaces, we tend to, all of us, tend to sort of fall back on the dominant, conservative narrative which is both damaging, and frankly, just wrong. It's incorrect. And so much of our work is dedicated to making sure that we are advancing a worldview that is both true, that's inclusive, and that actually reflects the reality of people's lives.

So that's how we get to this, "We are the economy," idea. The economy often is characterized as the stock market, or GDP, or all these things that, frankly, are intangible for most people and actually tell us very little, in fact, almost nothing, about actual people's lives. So, "We are the economy," sort of re-centers people in the economy and reflects the fact that it's us. It's our interactions. It's the demands we create. It's the labor we provide that actually creates the economy. It's not sort of these esoteric measures that actually have nothing to do with how people live day to day.

ANNE PRICE: This is Anne. I want to jump in on this a little bit, especially around narrative change, and we're really talking about how people make sense of the world and how they think about issues like our economy. And one thing you said, Angela, in really looking at these kind of intangible measures, I really think about also the narrative around the economy as being this entity that kind of, just things just kind of happen, and that basically our economy is not built on man-made decisions.

So can you talk a little bit more about how you see those narratives kind of taking place and what really is getting in the way of achieving what you think is racial and economic justice? What kind of narratives are really getting in the way of that?

JANELLE JONES: That is a fantastic question and really like the question that we want to answer with our entire organization. You know, people really think that the economy is something that is separate from, you know, what they do, the labor they provide. It's separate from how their families are doing. It's separate from how their communities are doing, and we know that that is not true.

We know that there are a bunch of economic narratives that are really core to the way American capitalism works that are just not true. The one that, you know, people are just born with is that it's a meritocracy, that really you work hard, you try hard, you major in STEM – somehow everyone's a STEM major, I'm not sure. We're just we're all taking math and engineering classes, everyone majors in STEM, everyone goes to college, everyone majors in STEM, and that's it and then we all win and we're all at the top. And that's, I mean, as an economist, as a mathematician, that's not really how the numbers work. But it's also just like not how the economy works at all.

We know that there are systems and structures in place that make sure that absolutely guarantee, everyone does not go to college, everyone cannot major in STEM, and everyone cannot be at the top. So I think this idea that it really is just individual behaviors and practices that keep people from, kind of, achieving the Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg life is something that's really based into the way people think about the economy that is fundamentally wrong.

I think another thing that we tend to downplay is really the importance of public power and public structures. So people, you know, we need roads to go to school, we need public teachers, we need – I was going to say we need police, but like I don't know. We can circle back to actually whether or not we really need police. But we need some rules to keep us from anarchy. And those are things that people are paying for and investing in with public

dollars that also lead to the way the economy is kind of structured. So I think people tend to kind of remove themselves and their sense of agency from what they can do in affecting their economic outcomes. And those are kind of some of the narratives and structures that we are trying to displace.

One way that Angela talks about doing that is really unlearning the conservative, dominant worldview which, you know, tells people all these things are true. And instead, focusing on people and putting the way people operate into the economy at the center of what it means for an economy to be working, for an economy to be successful.

ANNE PRICE: I want to just ask one point related to that and that really is around the fact that really what we're dealing with, it's a neoliberal narrative, one that actually puts markets first over people. That says that basically we, you know, markets work well on their own, that they reward you – and this is obviously a deep-seated narrative, one that people have poured billions of dollars into over decades, to reinforce policy change.

How are you all looking at this dominant narrative, and do you think that given conversations around some of the economic failures of neoliberalism, that there's a door opening to dig in on that narrative?

JANELLE JONES: Yeah, I think that there is. I mean I think one of the reasons, you know, now is really the time to talk about it is that we've been living through this lie and seeing how it has not delivered for the majority of people in this country. We have been saying that markets will make sure that everyone gets a fair shot, that everyone, you know, gets an opportunity to kind of live their best economic life and what we've seen is that when we do that, it actually doesn't work well.

We have inequality that is the highest it's ever been since we've been tracking it. We have entire communities, and particularly people of color, who are not even, like, considered in terms of measuring economic success. So I think now is really the time to talk about why that narrative is not working. And because we have just like so, so, so much data, and research, and lived experience of folks on the ground who can say that, you know, when we leave things to markets, when we don't regulate, when we don't use public power, when we don't invest in worker power, these things don't work out and here's how we're seeing that it's not working.

ANGELA HANKS: I totally am going to plus one everything Janelle said, obviously, and also add that we've seen the failures of neoliberalism play out, and the consequences for actual people. And to Janelle's point, the data are really there that show that this is actually not the right path forward.

I would just add that not only that but I think as we think about sort of what's gone wrong, part of what our task is here is to think about what an alternative vision looks like. So, you know, the economy is not a bunch of rich people getting richer and hoarding their dollars in Swiss bank accounts and not investing in the economy, while the rest of us struggle to get by.

A well-functioning economy is actually one that invests in people, that exercises public power, to Janelle's point, that ensures that people are able to live a life where they are able to exercise power on the job, where they are able to invest in their communities and be invested in through the public sector. And all those things are conditions that we can create, both as folks who work on policy, but also as people who exist in this economy and in this country.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Hi. I love this discussion and I really think that we're getting into something really meaty here, right?

So we're talking about neoliberalism and the narrative that it pushes particularly around kind of personal responsibility, right? And this idea that if you're poor, it's your fault that you're poor, and it's all about individual choices. And we don't look at kind of the structure of the economy and see ourselves in the economy, right? These are kind of the big narrative themes that we're talking about, but I want to hone in specifically.

You know, we are four women of color on this call. Three of us – or three of you – are Black women and I think we would be remiss if we didn't talk about gender and race specifically. I know you all have a lot to talk about how race, and gender, and specific narratives around race and gender impact our economy or the way we think about our economy or the way we think about race and gender specifically as it relates to communities and the economy.

ANGELA HANKS: I think going back to those narratives around personal responsibility, it's really a powerful and very convenient narrative that it's all individual. You know, your

success or failure in the economy or in the labor market, is entirely on you. It sort of allows us to avoid real questions around race, and gender, and power that I think all of us on this call know are sort of at the heart of a well-functioning economy – effectively grappling with all of those things.

But neoliberalism doesn't deal with it at all, right? So you have this system where it's like, "Oh well, it's up to you. If you fail, let's disregard decades or centuries of oppressive policies that have gotten us to this point, let's just focus on where we are today." The reality is that's just not – it does not reflect what's actually happening to people and it also leads to some really wrong conclusions about what we need to do to create an economy that works for everyone.

Focusing on personal responsibility, again, it sort of allows us to think less about race, and gender, and power. But if we are thinking about those things and we're centering, you know, for example, anti-blackness or misogyny, in the way that we're thinking about the economy, then we come up with a different set of solutions that acknowledge both historical and current structural impediments to people engaging in the economy in all kinds of different ways.

So going back to this, "We are the economy," idea. When we say "we," it's a shorthand for emphasizing the fact that we have to center the most marginalized folks when we think about building an economy that actually works. Because if people of color are left out of the economy, if women are left out of the economy, then the economy actually isn't really working.

That's really where we should start when we think about what makes the economy function – if the most marginalized among us are not doing well, then definitionally, the economy cannot be doing well.

JANELLE JONES: Yeah, I mean obviously all of that is absolutely correct, and I mean the Groundwork motto is, "We are the economy."

My own personal economic ideology is "Black women best." It's what I've been saying all across the country for months, at this point Angela's heard me talk about it at length. And it really I mean –

ANGELA HANKS: Yes, it's a great theory.

JANELLE JONES: It's a fundamental theory because even though it sounds exclusionary, it's not. It's like if the economy is working well for Black women, what does that mean for literally every other group of people in the economy? It means everyone else is doing absolutely fine. And it is a way to center the folks who have been completely left out, completely marginalized, in a way that, like when they are doing well, we know everyone else is doing well. So I think that it's, you know, it's actually a way to ensure that the rest of us are the economy, is to kind of center black women.

ANNE PRICE: I love how you're talking about centering Black women. Here at Insight, we've also been talking about how we need to center Blackness and how that could tell us a lot about how we can lift up all Americans.

And it seems that, you know, doing this work over many years, that kind of moving to this kind of thinking is very challenging. People are still really focused on class narratives and class issues of classicism. And while race has really become part of the discourse in the last couple of years, there's still this not a sense that somehow centering Blackness, centering Black women, is foundational and could actually help all Americans.

How are you all really thinking about how to push that conversation further than it's been?

JANELLE JONES: Oh, yeah, I'm definitely not saying that it's easy. I don't think, you know, I don't think it's going up on billboards. I don't think it's going to be the leading motto for whoever is the presidential candidate, but I think it's important.

I think it's a way to talk about all of the things that actually include a bunch of other communities and it's, you're right, it's making that connection. People, you know, I come from the economic space where the conversation around class is like the way we get everyone's buy in, it's what we lead with, it's how we get a cross-racial coalition, and what we've seen is that doesn't lead to a cross-racial coalition. The way to get to that is to, actually surprisingly, talk about race.

So I think it's really hard, it's really challenging. I think the way we're doing it is really trying to connect it through, "We are the economy." It's giving people the language, the

idea, and also like, the research, and the data that shows that when we lift up the people who have been marginalized, it actually lifts up everyone else. When we do things that are targeted towards communities of color, it's hard to do the economy well for people of color and white people not get any benefit, right?

It's hard to make sure that it's just a small group of, you know, Black women in the Midwest who are thriving but everyone else is doing terribly. That is impossible to do in the way that our economy is set up and the way that U.S. capitalism works. So it's really just trying to give people the language and thinking around that idea, but it's definitely challenging.

ANGELA HANKS: And I would just add that so much of our sort of policies around class are incredibly racialized. So if you think about domestic workers, you know, the modern labor law was developed to explicitly exclude largely Black women workers. And the result is, you know, 80 years later, we have an economy that still largely excludes this group of people who are still largely women of color.

And in fact, what you see in the labor market is work is actually trending more toward being worse for more people in the way that we've sort of set it out for this particular group of people, as well. So it's not just if you improve the working standards of – I mean, certainly if you improve the working standards of women of color in those positions, you improve them for everyone.

But it is also, you know, we ignore those conditions to the peril of everyone, as well.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: And this just leads me to another narrative I think that is really dominant when we're thinking about our economy which is like the scarcity mentality, right? Like there's only so much of the pie and so, therefore, we all have to scramble to get our piece of it.

We're taking plays into this idea like, if we start to talk about "I love Black women best," I think that that's awesome, I'm totally going to steal that. I'll credit you but I'm going to use it.

JANELLE JONES: You don't have to steal it, it's everyone's, please. I want it to catch on, truly.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Because we are the economy, yes, I love it.

But this idea that, can we speak to that a little bit, about how like when we talk about something like “Black women best,” what happens to other folks? Because we're living in this scarcity mentality, which is actually completely false.

ANGELA HANKS: Yeah, I mean a lot of our work is sort of dictated by an abundance frame. Again, this scarcity mindset is one, like an artifact of neoliberalism. But also one that is frankly totally pervasive in our economy and cuts along class lines, particularly across racial lines, and it's not productive for anyone.

If we start from the scarcity frame, we're going to get policies that assume there is too little and most of us have to fight for scraps. And that's not the reality, we have an incredible amount of untapped public power that we don't use.

We, at the federal level, don't raise nearly enough revenue. We don't – our anti-poverty programs, our programs around redistribution, are incredibly ungenerous and this is sort of all born out of this idea that there is very little to go around and so we'll behave as if resources are scarce.

I think what we are trying to advance is that a strong economy is one where there's plenty to go around, and crucially to that, it actually does have to go around. It's not just that we can create a bunch of millionaires and billionaires at the top and six people have enough wealth to make us one of the wealthiest countries in the world. It actually has to get around or else our economy fundamentally is not one that works.

JANELLE JONES: Even on the private sector side, what we've seen is like GDP is what, doubled, in a generation and what we know is that like the income for workers, for the typical worker, is actually, like, the same as it was 20 years ago. So it's not even just on the public side, which is, you know, an entirely different conversation to have that's crucial to this, but it's also like we are actually growing the economy.

The scarcity frame is complete and utter nonsense because the economy is always growing. Like GDP is always growing, we're always innovating. Productivity is- it's always moving up. What's not moving up is security, and stability, and wages for the typical American

worker. So it's only scarcity when it comes to people who are not billionaires and millionaires.

That's the only time when like we're running low, is when it's for like the typical worker. But for everyone else, there seems to be just like, not just one yacht but like a super yacht, not just a neighborhood but like, an island. There's plenty for people who have enough money. But it's just when you're poor that like, "No. I'm sorry. TANF can only be this amount of money. We're out, we're just out of benefits." So it's just- it's nonsense all across the board.

ANGELA HANKS: I 100% agree and I would actually even say that when you think about scarcity, I think what we're actually talking about is a power imbalance. It's exactly what Janelle said, it's that all of this is accruing somewhere. It's just that regular folks aren't able to access it because folks with a lot more power have been able to rig the rules so the benefits just go to them, even if it's workers, families, and communities whose labor and demand are actually making the economy grow.

JANELLE JONES: Right. The thing that is scarce is the power to actually decide how policy is made, and that I'm willing to just like, take from the people who have it.

ANGELA HANKS: Yes.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: I love it. I'm like snapping all over the place but you can't hear me because I'm putting myself on mute [laughs] while you're talking. But this is amazing.

I think that, you know, I feel this way, and I will just speak for myself. But often, for those of us that are doing this work around economic and racial justice, we're often on the offensive, right? We're constantly battling harmful policies and narratives that are either already present or continue coming down the pike, particularly with this administration.

We rarely get the time to kind of, sit down, and reflect, and be proactive, and dream about what is that thing that we actually want to create, right? Rather than just reacting to stuff,

like let's actually sit, be proactive, and dream, and vision about what does this world look like, right? So I just want to do that in this podcast for a minute.

Like let's, kind of, close our eyes, take a minute, and dream right now. What is the economic structure that we want to create, right? What does that look like? What does that community feel like? What does it taste like, right? And what do we need to build to get us to that place?

ANGELA HANKS: I want to share something that I've been carrying around with me for a little while. So actually, we've been going around to different cities across the country over the last year asking a similar question to folks who are sort of front lines in the movement, so mostly people who are working locally, that are really sort of advancing racial justice and economic justice in different places across the country.

And in one of the conversations where we had this discussion and we asked a similar question, a woman said something that I found so striking and I think it sort of speaks to the economy and the structure that I want to see, but is much better than whatever I would say, so I'll just quote her.

We asked what would the economy look like or what it would feel like, and the first thing she said is, "My body wouldn't ache."

And I thought that was so powerful because that is the kind of economy that we should --

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Wow.

ANGELA HANKS: -- be working toward. It is one where you are not, sort of, sacrificing your body in order to make an extra dollar or 50 cents an hour. That you have access to affordable health care and time off, time with your family, and that you're able to work, see the fruits of your labor, and be able to enjoy that.

And that to me is such a good way to think about what we want out of the economy, and I think there are certainly policies and structures that flow from that, but that's been something that's been sitting with me for a while.

JANELLE JONES: Yeah, I think that's right. I think I was in the room when that woman said that and it was just silence afterwards. It was like, "Yes. Yes, that's exactly what it looks like. That's exactly what it feels like."

And I think, you know, the systems and structures, Angela, in the case would be changed is if we had different people in power. I think, you know, the economic field would look differently. We would be calling different people experts on the economy because we are the economy, and we're all experiencing it, and we're all contributing to it, and we're all like reaping the benefits. You know, but the economy is entirely man-made. Right now, it's like entirely mostly white man-made, so we would have some different people making those decisions.

We would have people who kind of look like the folks on this call deciding how the folks who look like us are impacted by the policies and structures that are in place. So I think we would definitely see a little bit of that. We would also see kind of a redistribution of power. We talked a lot about it on this call and I mean, like, worker power, public power- all sorts of ways in which power is basically isolated and concentrated with wealthy corporations and individuals, all of that is just like, no more. It is the fundamental restructuring of who has control, who gets to decide, and who has a voice, and that's what I would like to see.

ANNE PRICE: Wow, that's great. I love how you're really bringing in ordinary Americans, their voices, into thinking about the economy. And really seeing this is not just an academic exercise, but one in which we're going to have to build power to change the rules that are causing such great pain and inequality.

I just want to kind of close my questions on one note, and just thinking and hearing you all speak and really thinking about the fact that we often don't hear women's voices in these spaces. We certainly are lacking women of color in these spaces.

So I'd love to just hear on a personal note from both of you as we bring this podcast to a close, what do you think that you bring that is really adding to discussions around the economy that we're missing? What do you think that women are adding in this space that is kind of moving this discussion forward?

ANGELA HANKS: I can speak totally personally. One of the things that drew me to Groundwork and to what we're trying to build here, is that we're doing it with women of color. We are a majority of women of color organization, majority women overall, and I

think it really, frankly, changes the way that you approach this work and so I think that's one thing that's been incredibly beneficial.

And I think to Janelle's point earlier, kind of beyond our individual organization, I think something that I've found to be, it's changing slowly but it is changing, is that increasingly, there are more of us in this space. It needs to change a lot more quickly but, you know, it's hard to talk about justice, and power, and sort of upending systems that were not designed to include us, when we're not in the room. And so I think one thing that's really been heartening, especially as we've gone out to other organizations across the country, is that you are seeing women of color really at the forefront of change and really at the forefront of economic and racial justice. Whether that's activists, economic policy experts, academics- I think that there's a lot of exciting work going on and I'm glad to be a small part of it and to witness the incredible work that folks across the country are doing. You both included, Jhumpa and Anne, of course.

JANELLE JONES: Yeah, I think that's right. I think we are, you know, this organization is something that I have not seen replicated in many other places, so I'm excited to see that. And I think, you know, the question about, kind of, making space is really important to me.

So I think, you know, Angela and I are leading this organization and we're really trying to make sure that something that we do is bring more people who look like us into this space. And not just as, you know, I mean everyone should be doing what they can across the movement, but we're also bringing people into this space as experts, right? So you don't need to have a Ph.D. in economics from Harvard to understand that like your community has not recovered from the last recession so you're not prepared for the next recession. That is something that people know. That is something that people know to be true and those people should be on panels with Larry Summers, and Jared Bernstein, and Jason Furman because they have just as much to say.

So I think for me, making room in the movement for other women of color is something I care a lot about doing. And I think, you know, I'm thinking a little bit of Nina Banks, a Black woman economist who has spent a lot of time talking and thinking about the way Black women have, kind of, always done the work. You know, in the history of this country, we've always really done this work in our families, in our churches, in our communities and I think now is the time for us to really take the platform that's been given and do it across the country.

And so, you know, nothing makes me more excited than seeing a movement that is led by women of color. And it's how we get to fight for 15, right? It's how we get to a national minimum wage of \$15. So really since we're women of color, because we just we have the tools, we know how to do it, we've been doing it for generations- really just kind of giving women of color a bigger platform to do the work on a national scale is something I'm super excited about, and I think is important right now.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: I love it. Let's plot to take over the world. I think that would be so much of a better world to live in, I really do.

ANGELA HANKS: Yes, let's do it.

JANELLE JONES: I mean, that's something I'm really telling my boss every day and he's like, "Breathe. Let's breathe." So we're trying, we're taking baby steps but we're getting there. We're getting there, it's true. We're well on our way.

JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: Thank you so much, Angela and Janelle, both of you, for sharing your time and expertise with us on our podcast today. It has been a pleasure listening to you. Seriously, I was just like sitting here in awe just listening to you speak and in complete agreement with everything that you said.

And am excited to be a part of the economy with you all and really continue the momentum that's been growing. I really feel like in the last year or so, I just feel like we're – people are hungry for a change, you know, and hungry to see something different. Because everyone feels just how terrible our policies are right now and this continued, you know, priority of profits over people is hitting people and in a very distinct way. And I think people know, like deep inside that there has to be something different.

JANELLE JONES: We're happy to do it with you all, for sure.



JHUMPA BHATTACHARYA: This is awesome. Thank you, again.

And thank you all for tuning into this episode of Hidden Truths, the podcast of the Insight Center for Community Economic Development. You can learn more about Angela and Janelle's work at the Groundwork Collaborative by visiting GroundworkCollaborative.org. For more information about the Insight Center, visit InsightCCED.org. Thanks, everyone.

[Music]